

Introduction

COVID has been a trigger for anxiety in many people, including children. There has been a great amount of uncertainty and many new routines and rules that we have had to deal with which can feel overwhelming at times. As children prepare to return to school in September, many may start to feel extremely anxious.

Children often find it difficult to recognise, understand and communicate feelings of anxiety. Instead they may communicate this through their daily behaviours which could include: anger, defiance, outbursts, lack of focus, difficulties sleeping, avoidance and negativity.

What to do if your child is anxious about returning to school

Below are 5 simple tips to help you support your child if they are anxious about returning to school:

1. Talk to your child

Decide on a time to talk with your child where there will be no interruptions so you can give them your full attention. You may wish to use some conversation starters, share stories (e.g. The Huge Bag of Worries) or watch a film (e.g. Inside Out) to begin your conversation.

Try to avoid telling your child how they are feeling and never dismiss what they tell you. Instead, listen and repeat back what they say. This will show them that you have listened and also helps clarify that you have understood what they have said.

Younger children may find it difficult to recognise and name emotions so they may describe the way 'physically' they are feeling e.g. 'butterflies in tummy'. You can help your child to name the emotion linked to the physical sensation by using clarifying prompts and questions, for example: 'Sometimes I feel like I have butterflies in my tummy when I'm worried. I'm wondering if you may feel worried about going back to school.'

Make time to check-in with your child daily and carry out an emotional thermometer check as to how they are feeling – you can use visuals to support this e.g. a traffic light, number scale, smiley/straight/sad faces.

2. Reassure your child

Explain to your child that it is perfectly normal to feel worry and anxiety about certain things in life. Validate their feelings and reassure them that everyone feels like this sometimes and that it's OK. Share a time when you felt like they did and explain how you dealt with the situation positively.

Talk positively about the advantages of returning to school e.g. seeing their friends, learning new things and use problem solving steps to address any concerns they may have to reassure them.

3. Prepare your child

Children like to feel safe and secure therefore it is important that you prepare your child for their return to school. This will provide them with predictability and structure which will help reassure them. Share transitional resources that the school has made available to support their return e.g. booklets, videos, website resources. Talk about what may look different when they return to school so they are fully prepared. There are many resources available online to help explain this in a child-friendly way. This is also a good opportunity to reassure your child of all the things that will still be the same at school.

Try to involve your child in planning for their return to school e.g. school uniform, equipment, checklists. You may also wish to provide your child with a visual countdown for their return to school so they can anticipate the event.

4. Practise coping strategies with your child

Teach your child some simple coping strategies to use when they are feeling overwhelmed to help them self-regulate their emotions. Make time together when you will not be disturbed and model the coping skills. Practise the skills regularly together until they are able to carry them out independently. Remind your child of the coping skills when they are feeling anxious.

- Breathing – practise slow and deep breathing skills, blowing bubbles/pinwheel/balloon.
- Relaxation – mindfulness colouring/activities, yoga, guided meditation, listening to calming music, mental imagery/visualisation.
- Grounding – notice 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, 1 thing you can taste.
- Self-Talk – positive and helpful (green) thoughts to talk back to negative and unhelpful (red) thoughts, write positive affirmations for their anxieties e.g. red thought: I can't do it = green thought: I can try my best, red thought: I give up = green thought: I'll get there in the end.

5. Praise your child

It is important that you praise your child when they are managing, or are attempting to manage their emotions. When children receive positive attention for a behaviour, they are more likely to repeat that behaviour so try to recognise when your child is trying to deal with their emotions to encourage them. Give them praise that is positive and specific e.g. 'I can see you're feeling a bit stressed, well done for staying calm and asking for help.'

Useful links and resources:

Young Minds - information and help for parents/carers in supporting their child:

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/>

CBeebies – information and advice for managing anxiety in primary school:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/joinin/dualwa-anxiety-in-primary-school>

NHS website: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/anxiety-in-children/>

Action for Children - support for parents/carers: <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/support-for-parents/children-s-mental-health/children-s-anxiety/>

East Sussex Local Offer - information for parents/carers and families:

www.eastsussex.gov.uk/childrenandfamilies/specialneeds/

School Health - support for parents/carers: <https://www.kentcht.nhs.uk/service/school-health/>

Open for Parents - parenting support and information for families: www.openforparents.org.uk

The Anxious Child - booklet for parents/carers:

https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/anxious_child.pdf

Back to school e-storybook for parents/carers to use with their child: [https://e-](https://e-bug.eu/downloads/english/COVID19_006_My%20Back%20to%20School%20Bubble_English.pdf)

[bug.eu/downloads/english/COVID19_006_My%20Back%20to%20School%20Bubble_English.pdf](https://e-bug.eu/downloads/english/COVID19_006_My%20Back%20to%20School%20Bubble_English.pdf)

Free resources to help anxious children: <https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/blog/2017/09/28/new-free-resources-to-help-anxious-children>

Anna Freud Centre return to school toolkit: <https://mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/media/2077/coronavirus-toolkit-return-to-school.pdf>